Why Mai is Always so Morose
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[Author's note: This is a fan fic about Mai from the show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and her strict upbringing. Warning: It's got a couple instances of corporal punishment, but some really nice scenes as well. I try to write realistic fan fics which I think help explain the characters.

Content warning: depicts emotional abuse and corporal punishment for dramatic purposes. I do not endorse the actions depicted in this story.]

Any day Mai spent with her mother was a day Mai was punished for doing something or other. Her mother knew every obscure rule of etiquette in existence, and try as she might, Mai inevitably broke at least one. It might have been anything from speaking out of turn to her pinky not being angled correctly when taking a drink. It was worse when they were in society. Mai's parents' greatest concern was always the family pride, and if they thought their daughter was acting up in the presence of other families, she would be punished without fail. For minor breaches of etiquette, her mother took no notice of it until later that night when she administered Mai's punishment. Heaven help Mai if she actually misbehaved in the sense that any other

family would describe misbehavior. If she ever threw a tantrum or was just behaving rudely, Mai's mother would announce to the world that her daughter would be punished, and severely.

Mai's spankings were always administered late at night, right before bed, unless she just asked for it by continuing to be unruly even after her mother's announcement. This was quite rare, since Mai was far more reserved and cultured than the average child. She hated spankings, and did everything she could to avoid challenging her mother's authority and making it worse for herself.

One year, there was a celebration of a victory by General Iroh at the royal palace. Mai's mother loved that Mai and Azula were "friends" and did everything she could to encourage that friendship to blossom. It could be most advantageous for the family pride in the future. During their stay, Mai sat through countless dinners and speeches by boring military chaps (General Iroh being the exception with his witty war stories). Her mother spent the first few days among higher society, which meant that Mai got away with two days without being punished for something.

But, on the third day, they ate dinner privately with Ursa and Azula (the men were otherwise occupied). At one point, Mai accidentally sipped at her tea too loudly. No one noticed but her mother, whose eyes flicked towards her daughter for only an instant. Right then, Mai knew she had broken at least one rule, and was resigned to her fate.

Since her mother used such limited methods to punish her daughter, Mai had actually grown used to the brief spankings over the years to the point where she barely worried about it. The rest of the dinner passed without incident, and Mai took her time getting ready for bed.

Sure enough, her mother was waiting in her bedroom, seated in the middle of the floor. Without a word of complaint, Mai approached her mother and lay obediently across her lap. No struggle, no pleading, no kicking or trying to block her mother's hand. Mai knew the routine. She just remembered to lift her kimono before the spanking began. The third time Mai performed a serious breach of etiquette, she was spanked on her undergarments, without the protection of her heavy kimono. If she broke the same rule yet again, it would be on the bare.

Her mother didn't say a word. She never did.

She expected her daughter to know what she was being punished for, and whether it was her second or third offense. If Mai was unsure, she would ask her mother if she needed to remove her skirt. If Mai forgot to ask, then her mother would simply begin the spanking and wait for her to comply with the unspoken rule. When she was eight, Mai had endured over a dozen smacks before she realized that her mother expected her to bare her behind. None of the smacks had counted.

Mai usually had a good idea of whether she had to undress before the spanking, so she rarely asked her mother to remind her. When she did ask, her mother snapped at her, and Mai hated

the insult. Besides, it was just wise to remove the heavy skirt since Mai had been punished for most infractions at least once in her life. Most likely, she had been spanked once or twice without the protection of her kimono because she did not ask, but Mai's pride was worth more than a little sting more or less.

This time, Mai knew for sure that it was her third offense. The instant she lifted her kimono, she felt five sharp smacks in quick succession. Her mother wasted no time. An instant's pause, then three more smacks, then three more. Mai realized for the first time that she must have broken a couple minor rules as well that evening. When it was clear that her punishment was over, Mai stood up and went to bed.

The next evening was a long, dull ceremony. General Iroh awarded hundreds of soldiers with various recognitions of valor and the like. Mai was growing more and more restless as the hours dragged by.

Azula didn't make the least effort to restrain herself. "The tubby general's son got a medal. Who saw that one coming?" Azula whispered into Mai's ear. Mai snickered, only to be shushed harshly by her mother.

At one point, Iroh had a little difficulty pinning a medal to a soldier's uniform. A few in the audience giggled, and when he saw the soldier wink, Iroh quipped, "Corporal, I doubt you had half as much trouble capturing that base as I am having with this medal." That brought a pleasant laugh from the weary audience.

As the laughter died down, Mai whispered, "Must be hard with those chubby fingers," a little louder than she meant to. Ty-lee's piercing giggle made it worse. Her mother glared at her fiercely, but said nothing. Mai knew she would be punished that night, but who cared.

However, that night, Mai's mother was nowhere to be seen. Pleased with her good luck, Mai went to sleep.

The third day finally presented the girls with a break from the tedious military celebrations. They were playing outside with Zuko, who had grudgingly agreed to play with them at his mother's request.

They had finished a game of tag when Mai's mother appeared. "What do you want, ma'am?" asked Mai, quickly adding the "ma'am" when she realized her Mom might find her tone disrespectful.

"I've put this off long enough. It's time for you to be disciplined for your disgraceful behavior yesterday. The reason I have postponed your punishment until today…" Mother announced as she snatched her reluctant daughter's wrist, "...is because you misbehaved in front of your friends. That they were becoming unruly by no means permits you to act likewise. I want your friends to watch carefully as you accept the consequences for your willfulness."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ty Lee, innocently.

Mother lay Mai across her lap, and lifted her daughter's skirt. "I am going to spank her, of course, good and hard." With that, she began spanking Mai furiously. Mai squealed and pleaded for her mother to stop.

Prince Zuko was completely taken aback. "Wait, you don't have to--" he began, reaching out a hand to intervene, but Azula stopped him immediately.

Mother answered, "I'm afraid I must, Prince Zuko." Mai was now kicking furiously, trying to escape. "Mai, your behavior during your punishment has been disgraceful. You will remain still, and quietly accept your spanking." Slowly, deliberately, Mai's mother pulled down her daughter's undergarments, revealing the girl's blushing pink bottom to everyone.

Mai started to panic. Spankings had always been a quiet, private affair. Now, her mother scolded her with each smack, something that had never happened before. Her mother's punishments were usually so structured: exactly this many smacks for this offense. This spanking dragged on, Mai lost count after two dozen smacks, and it didn't stop until she was crying profusely.

"Promise to behave in future," demanded her mother.

Mai was too busy trying to control her sobs to answer, but when a smarting swat caught her by surprise, she realized that she had better answer. Mai could never remember exactly what she or her mother had said. She answered all her mother's questions, promised anything her mother asked her, anything to make the ordeal stop.

"What is all this noise?" boomed a deep male voice. Mai gasped. General Iroh had entered the courtyard. The Crown Prince of the fire nation was watching her being spanked! Directly behind him was Ursa, the younger prince's wife!

"Oh, Crown Prince Iroh. Nothing worthy of concern. I am merely providing my daughter with some much-needed guidance."

"Isn't this sort of thing normally done in private? You have ruined my quiet tea time!"

"I beg your pardon. But Mai's behavior warranted immediate attention. Mai, tell the general why you are being punished." Mai didn't want to admit anything of the sort, until her mother motivated her with a smack.

"I-I made noise during the ceremony yesterday! I was willful, and made rude comments to my friends," she squeaked, hoping it was exactly what her mother wanted to hear.

"Tell the general what your rude comment was, Mai."

It took two more smacks before Mai had the nerve to shout, "I made fun of you for being fat!"

Mai's mother waited to hear the general's response, expecting him to become angry and encourage her to continue the punishment. To everyone's surprise, Iroh laughed heartily. "Well, she isn't the first to have done so, and she won't be the last. I wouldn't punish the girl too hard. She's only observing the truth," he mused, rubbing his belly.

Mother scowled. "Of course, give me a moment more, and I think Mai will have been sufficiently punished. Since it was you she insulted, would you care to watch me conclude her punishment?"

Iroh suddenly looked disapproving. "No thank you. There's nothing wrong with children learning discipline, but I beg you not to punish her any more on my account. Also, I do not think my nephew and niece should watch any more of this punishment. I believe that their mother would agree?" he bowed very respectfully.

Ursa nodded, "I certainly do. Azula, Zuko, will you two follow me?" Zuko obeyed immediately, but Azula walked behind her mother at a crawl, hoping to catch a bit more as they left. Ursa wiped the smirk off of her daughter's face with one sharp smack as they passed through the gate. Ursa found nothing amusing about the situation.

"You as well little girl, em," added Iroh, struggling to remember the name.

"Ty Lee, Mr. Iroh!" she announced, and skipped after him.

Mother did not try to stop the General as he escorted the three from the courtyard. She only gave her distraught daughter three more smacks, and stood Mai up and met her eyes. "That spanking was for your willful disobedience, and for the benefit of your friends. You still need to be punished for your other failures. That will be carried out tonight, in your bedroom, in our customary manner." Never before had Mai dreaded the prospect of a spanking so much.

Dinner followed shortly thereafter, and it was torture. Iroh was there, as well as Ozai, Ursa, and her three friends. Mai prayed her mother wouldn't mention the spanking and embarrass her further. She squirmed the instant she sat down. Her mother gave her the warning glance, but Mai couldn't help herself. Throughout the meal, she kept fidgeting, and knew every time she looked into her mother's eyes that the situation was getting worse. Azula couldn't stop smirking. Zuko never looked Mai in the eye.

Iroh sat and watched all of these silent interactions, ignoring Ozai's conversation.

Mai blushed red. But her embarrassment was quickly being replaced by anger. She was indignant over the way her mother had treated her and was treating her. She hadn't been any worse than Ty Lee or Azula, but she was the only one who had been punished so strictly.

She reached the boiling point when her mother whispered into her ear that if she did not stop squirming and scowling, she would give her a spanking right then and there, rather than wait until that night. It was loud enough that the others could hear.

For once in her life, Mai felt like rebelling, making her mother just as embarrassed as she felt.

When Iroh asked for a third helping of roast turtle-duck, Mai thought of an insult and she didn't bother to restrain herself. "At this rate, you'll eat the whole turtle-duck flock. No wonder you're the size you are."

Dead silence.

"How dare you, you-wicked child! I will beat that meanness out of you. Come! Right now!" said her mother through clenched teeth.

"My lady," interposed Prince Iroh, "Since this regrettable comment was directed at me, may I witness the punishment myself?" Mai felt a surge of hatred for the old man, but she was not embarrassed any more. She was proud, and would hold her head high.

"Yes, of course, crown prince. In fact, I give you permission to administer her punishment yourself if you wish."

"I accept. Come girl," he said sternly. "By your leave, ma'am, I would like to have a private word with your daughter."

Mother would have liked to oversee the punishment herself, but she gave Iroh permission without hesitation.

Mai was almost blind with anger, but she still noticed when Iroh gave Ursa and Zuko a subtle wink. No one else at the table would have been able to see that.

Iroh took her into an empty room and sat her down in front of him. With a sigh, he said in a very calm voice, "Now, be honest with me. I think that comment just now was meant for your mother far more than it was meant to offend me, am I right?"

Mai, who was trying to look as confident and proud as possible, was surprised. The perceptive old man had hit the mark. She nodded, taken aback.

"I see. Well, I don't approve of such behavior, but I can't pretend I wouldn't feel the same way in your situation. You must have been terribly humiliated, ashamed. You may not believe it, but I

think I know how you feel now. I've often felt great shame myself. Being called fat, that's quite humiliating, almost as humiliating as getting spanked in front of your friends?" He paused, but Mai said nothing. She only listened as she felt her "righteous anger" ebbing away. "People who are ashamed often want to do something to regain their honor, to show they have some pride. That was what you were trying to do." Mai nodded, yes. "Well, let me give you some sound advice. Pride is not the opposite of shame, but its source. And trying to hurt others is no way to regain your honor. Tearing others down will not build you up. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you."

Mai felt a tear on her cheek. "Yes, sir. I think you're exactly right. I-I'm so sorry for what I said. I wasn't thinking. It just slipped out. I'm – ashamed for saying that."

"Don't be. You have apologized to me and I forgive you, and there's an end of it. Now, as for your 'punishment,'" he checked over his shoulder like a young mischievous boy. "Out there, your mother is waiting for you to be punished, and you can bet that niece of mine is straining her ears to hear you crying."

"I understand," said Mai. Iroh was standing, so she couldn't lean over his lap. She was waiting for him to begin when he added, "Make sure you yell loud enough for them to hear you." Awkwardly, she turned and bent down, putting her hands on her knees.

"What are you doing? Start crying," he asked, almost laughing.

"Cry? Won't I cry when you spank me?" she asked, confused.

"Have you learned your lesson? Will you ever try to deliberately embarrass your mother again?"

"No."

"Then, just follow my lead."

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Outside, Azula was waiting impatiently. "How long is that duff going to scold her anyway," she thought to herself. Then, she heard the distinctive sounds of slapping and screaming. Iroh was scolding in a loud voice, and Mai was pleading for him to stop, promising to be good. After a good twenty hard slapping sounds, the two emerged, Mai's cheeks wet with tears.

At the meal, Mai still felt a little embarrassed. Her mother, father, and Prince Ozai were glowering at her. Then, Iroh brought the topic of conversation around to tough military training, and one hard drill master he had served under in particular. "He made me practice my firebending from underwater. Said I needed to sweat off some extra weight. Well, of course, the longer I went, the hotter the water got, until I was scalded red all over."

He also reminisced about an embarrassing incident Ozai had had with a military instructor, which involved his pants catching on fire. Ozai's mouth tightened with embarrassment.

Then Zuko told a story about how his instructor had made him practice through the night when he kept failing at his fire bending.

Soon, everyone was taking a turn telling the story of an embarrassing moment. Ursa even told a funny story from her childhood, which ended with her being spanked. Suddenly, Mai felt the tension was gone. Thanks to Iroh, everyone had shared a fun, embarrassing little story, and even the adults couldn't glower at Mai anymore. Were they any better when they were young?

Later that evening, Mai checked her bottom. The scarlet marks from her mother's spanking had faded completely, but she was fairly sure she had another one coming tonight. As long as it was in private though, she wasn't going to worry about it. She didn't like anything about being spanked, but she knew she deserved one after her behavior at dinner.

She had just dressed in her sleeping gown when she heard a knock at her bedroom door. She gulped. It was quite a bit early for her mother to be administering a bedtime spanking. But to her surprise, it was Prince Zuko.

"Um, hi," he said.

"Hi."

There was an awkward silence.

"I'm sorry about what happened today. I didn't want to watch that, but Azula-"

Mai blushed at the thought, as did Zuko. "It's okay. I understand," she said stiffly.

"Does it still hurt?"

"No. Though, I'll probably get another one tonight." Why did she say that? It just came out of her mouth. She didn't have to tell Zuko that, but he was being so nice and sincere, she couldn't help but be sincere herself.

"I'm sorry. Three spankings in one day?"

"No! Can you keep a secret?" When she saw him nod, she explained, "Iroh didn't spank me, you see. He clapped his hands and I faked crying."

Zuko sighed in relief. "I thought he might have done that. He winked at me and Mother, see. So, that must have been where Mother learned that trick?"

"Your mother has done that?"

"Well, I got spanked a couple of times when I was younger. Don't get the wrong idea, Mother hates having to punish us. Sometimes, Azula would demand that I get spanked for something, so Mom would fake it just like Iroh did. Now I'm too old for it, anyway. You'll be too old for spanking, too, soon," he added.

Mai felt much less embarrassed when she heard that Zuko had been spanked. Sometimes she felt like she was the only one who ever got spanked for anything, her parents were so strict. Plus, the idea that her parents might soon deem her too old for spankings was very encouraging, though she doubted her mother was nearly as merciful as Ursa.

"How did you get the tears on your cheeks?"

"Oh my," giggled Mai. "He had me spit in my palm and rub it under my eyes. I didn't want to do it at first, but he convinced me. I–was taught never to spit when I was very young. I always have to remember to control myself. Never let my emotions show if I want others to approve of me," she recited her parents' golden rule to herself as she tried to hold back tears. "I feel like I always have to suppress the way I'm feeling, or I'll get in trouble, like you saw today…"

Zuko put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. If you want, you can–come talk to me when you start feeling that way. You don't have to keep all that bottled up inside. Or else it'll all explode later. I know from experience."

Mai hesitated, then hugged him gently. "Okay, it'd be great to have a friend I could talk to about stuff like that."

Zuko returned the hug, then, after a moment, knew it was a good time for him to leave Mai to herself.

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Mai's mother entered. Before her mother could say anything, Mai bowed. "Mother, I am truly sorry for my behavior. On purpose, I tried to embarrass you. Please forgive me! Before you punish me, I want to know you forgive me!"

Her mother seemed taken aback by this repentance. "Well, dear, of course I forgive you. And, I hope I never have to spank you in public again."

"You won't, ma'am. I don't ever want you to have to do that."

Her mother nodded. "Okay dear. Then I promise I won't. If you need discipline, it will be strictly private."

"Thank you, mother," said Mai enthusiastically, again surprising her mother by her display of emotion.

"You realize that, even though you're forgiven, you have to face the consequences of your actions?"

"Yes, ma'am…I'm ready."

The End